
R. E. LEE

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MANY YEARS must pass before the general history of the great war of the sixties is written, before ultimate judgment may assess the relative value of the leading performers; even before the meaning of victory and defeat can be taken. Already much work has been done on the campaigns in the east, but this present biography* of the Confederacy's first general will stand for a long while as the last word on his military performance. And this word has a larger implication than the narrative of other army commanders. The definitive lives of Lee and Jackson, but especially of Lee, mark the final record of Southern defense in the east. And because of the great strength of his name and his genius for victory, in the darkest hours of the last months, Lee defined Confederate resistance for the Southern nation. This consideration gives Freeman's biography special importance and justifies its length. He has spent nineteen years in gathering material and putting it together. Factually it is complete. Other material will undoubtedly be uncovered; but one cannot believe that it will question the finality of Freeman's selection. The four volumes of over two thousand pages have been beautifully and expensively presented. Illustrations are liberally inserted; and for the first time there are sufficient maps, intelligently placed, which make it easy to visualize the army's movements in campaign and battle.

Any life of Lee which proposes to be definitive must of necessity lay great and special demands upon the author's critical imagination. From

* *R. E. Lee*, by Douglas Southall Freeman. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 4 vols. \$3.75 each.

the length of this narrative and the time taken in its preparation, one may safely assume that the author has set himself to his task with such a design in view. He begins by going very fully into Lee's early life, showing racial traits, social inheritances, his mother's training, the tragic end to his father's career. These sections are conventionally done; and although they assemble fresh incidents of his youth and early manhood, the incidents do not expose much additional knowledge of his character. He is a Christian gentleman with great energy and capacity, thrifty, practised in self-denial, dependent upon family life, and suffering at times from frustration due to the slow promotion of army life. A great deal is said about his ancestry and the distinguished station occupied by his contemporary connections. This does much to place him in the mind of the reader; but, in the light of this society's destruction, it could have been more imaginatively handled. When times were stricter, as in the eighteenth century, it was not necessary for the biographer of a great soldier to explain the society from which he had sprung or his particular place in it, because the reader, being a part of that society, intuitively understood its nature, its divisions and institutions. In that time, when a political quarrel was settled by war, nothing was changed fundamentally. But with Lee it was different. He was called on to defend the society itself which produced him and the life he loved, a thing which he seems never to have understood. He conducted his campaigns largely in the eighteenth century fashion as he had seen war conducted in Mexico. This fact gives to the tragedy of his life a flavor of irony which the author has singularly missed.

But the moment the biography becomes military narrative the tone of the writing and the interpretation become sure and skillful. The style takes a direction which only the most superior knowledge and understanding of the arts of war can give. No matter how difficult the manoeuvre or how confusing the tactical dispositions, there is always the greatest clarity of exposition, from the conclusions reached by the commander from the intelligence reports to the final shock of brigades on the field. Freeman understands the dramatic power of restraint, and the high quality of the prose testifies to his effective use of understatement. Throughout, he combines in the most adroit manner exciting description with the analysis of elements which have brought about the particular military conclusion, so

that the reader's judgment is assisted in the most useful way. His chief and most dramatic device is what he terms the "fog of war." The method proposes to show only what was in Lee's mind at a given moment; how he reasoned in this fog and came to his conclusions. This allows for a truer judgment of his ability as a commander, and disputes in the most telling way critics who, in the knowledge of after events, have blamed him for decisions he was forced to make while laboring in the "fog." The one valid criticism to the exclusive use of this method is the limited information it gives to the reader. To get the full effect the reader needs to know the strength and dispositions of the opposing army, what was going on in Lee's army which Lee did not know, and something of those influences which led the enemy into miscalculations and blunders. Often Freeman, in the summation at the end of chapters or in footnotes, gives this additional information; but at times he so orders it that the reader finds himself wandering in a fog of his own which borders on obscurity.

But the method is a valuable and permanent contribution to military biography, a contribution which must greatly improve it. It is most successful in Scott's march on Mexico City, for here Lee is not a commander but an officer of the staff, operating for the most part on detached reconnaissance duty. The approach, therefore, to any situation is concrete and personal: Lee performing in dangerous positions, making hazardous scouts; or sustaining terrific hardships, such as crossing the *pedregal* in foul weather, on a black night, to carry information that would help assure victory. During this entire campaign he proved the perfect subordinate, and the thorough way in which his part is displayed serves as a fine introduction to him in the familiar rôle as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Freeman keeps in mind this very fact, and while the description of the advance on Mexico City is one of the best things in the book, remaining with the reader as the equal to the best which follows, he is not allowed to forget that Mexico was the laboratory where Lee learned the rules of combat. For there he studied and was later to adopt Scott's theory of high command. The commanding general's function, according to Scott, is to plan the general operation, acquaint the corps commanders with the plan, and see that their troops are brought to the proper places at the proper

time. Here his duties cease. After a battle is joined, it is not the commander's function to fight it in detail. Since the too rigid practice of this theory has been considered as Lee's greatest fault as a general, the Mexican War was destined to have a profound influence upon the American concept of society.

But his military education did not end with this. It was advanced by six other lessons: (1) audacity; (2) the value of working with a trained staff; (3) the relation of careful reconnaissance to sound strategy; (4) the advantage of flanking movements; (5) the relation of communications to strategy—how an army, as Scott's did, may abandon its line of supply and live off the country; (6) the value of fortification, an art very little developed at that time in open warfare. In addition to these things, he saw the necessity for the commander to remain on good terms with his lieutenants. Scott's quarrels with his division heads, after the entry into Mexico City, almost wrecked the army. This example became such a warning to Lee that he went to the other extreme, often to the detriment of the cause. To sum up—at the close of hostilities Lee had observed an army under all conditions but that of retreat. A practical knowledge of cavalry and tactics were also missing from his military education. These lessons had to wait for more desperate days.

It has been the common belief that his genius was constant from beginning to end; that his powers were at times intuitive, if not actually metaphysical. The memoirs of one of his staff officers state as much. But another school, arguing from doctrinaire rules of war, misunderstanding the special nature of the American issue, has accused him of rashness. The peculiar value of Freeman's narrative lies in its demonstration of Lee's growth as a soldier, in its insight into, and instruction with regard to, the obstacles and limitations imposed upon his decisions at every vital moment of manoeuvre and battle, from the time he is charged with the mobilization of the Virginia forces to the bitter resolution to surrender his army. Always he was forced to take the second-best way of doing things, either because of the failure of the commissary, when a well-fed and well-equipped army might have made victories decisive; or because of the lack of forage for his animals; or because of the sloth and incapacity of his officers, even their insubordination (Longstreet at Gettysburg; Field in the Wilderness);

or because of more general situations having to do with the nature of the general defense.

We watch through the four years of war his great mind work: the cohesion of intellect, character, and physical endurance, united by a sensibility which gives to every thought and action a common genesis. We watch it analyzing intelligence reports until the purpose of the enemy seems clear. And once he has made up his mind the decision for action is quick and irrevocable. If it is to manoeuvre, the orders he gives for marching are clear and specific. This quality of his orders and not the speed of the march moved his brigades to the proper place at the proper time, just as the order to engage rested upon a confident synthesis of all the elements which denied any alternative. It was this functioning of a complete man of great power which justified the confidence of his army and turned it into a fighting machine; which warranted a boldness that in lesser men would have been mere rashness; which turned the blunders or inadequacies of his subordinates into Confederate victories; and which helps, finally, explain the ultimate defeat of the man and the cause he defended so well—for the flaw in the character of a person of such near-perfection must be commensurate with his virtues.

In reading military history it is very hard to find a writer who understands how campaigning, losses in battle, and other causes are continually operating to change the nature of an army. But in this quality of narrative Freeman excels. The variable temper of the Army of Northern Virginia, influencing Lee and influenced by him, is handled in the most thorough way, until its special character before every battle helps define the outcome. For example, during the Seven Days the army was a loose agglomeration of regiments, at best six semi-independent commands, ordered upon faulty maps, and under the control of a leader who had taken charge after the campaign was under way. These particular movements of troops are the most difficult of the war to clarify and bring alive; yet it is here that the author's technique proves most successful. In the narrative proper, in footnotes and appendices, he sets forth step by step why Lee failed to crush McClellan, although he was able to bring relief to Richmond. Never once was his grand strategy realized tactically. Always each battle was fought by a part of the army with excessive loss because the turning movements

never reached the desired point at the desired time. Freeman sets forth the probable reasons in a clear argument, and he is always careful to withhold a positive judgment when the nature of the evidence is conflicting.

After this campaign Lee welded the divisions into effective combat units. The men had already shown their superior fighting abilities; but for the most part the general officers, with certain exceptions, displayed serious shortcomings. With a fine union of decision and tact—he had already won the confidence of all arms—Lee quickly undertook its reorganization. Very quietly he shelved the incompetent generals and, so gradually that it was not noticed, shifted troops from those officers who had not distinguished themselves to more skillful commanders. Building up the staff, he combined the divisions into two corps, making the army's efficiency depend upon three men: Longstreet, Jackson, and Stuart. This was the reorganization which would make both Lee and his army famous—Jackson, the combat wing; Longstreet, the support; and Stuart, the intelligence.

Having once taken their measure, he would plan his marches and battles upon his knowledge of their joint capacity; and the soundness of his judgment was always borne out by their actions. Stuart never brought him a piece of false information; Longstreet, until circumstances called upon him to play a part for which he was unfitted, once he got into action, slow though he was, showed superb tactical sense. It was not by accident that Lee pitched his tent near this general's headquarters. And Jackson, the spearhead of the army, was the perfect instrument to carry out his chief's daring resolutions. From the beginning there was a perfect understanding between the two men. Lee's orders to Jackson were terse and professional. He knew there was no need for the diplomatic approach which he used with certain of his citizen generals. Jackson often disagreed about plans; but if he was overruled, he would make Lee's plan his own and carry it out as he alone could do it. He is reported as saying after the Seven Days that he would follow Lee blindfolded, which has a curious corollary, for Lee at that time seems to have doubted Jackson's willingness to serve under another. Lee, daring in conception; Jackson, daring and deadly in execution . . . from such a marriage of genius sprang the triumphs of Second Manassas, Sharpsburg, Fredericksburg, and the supreme trial of their spiritual union, Chancellorsville. The most stirring scene in the four

long books is their last conference together, when Lee decides to divide his small army (Longstreet's corps is absent in North Carolina) and send Jackson with a force around Hooker's flank. It is the only way by which the Confederates may retain the offensive. "What do you propose to make this movement with?" asked Lee. "With my whole corps," answered Jackson. This was Jackson's own conception, writes Freeman; his major contribution to the campaign. He would not attempt a simple turning movement that would leave an opening for a general assault. Lee had not expected this, for it would leave him only two divisions to face an enemy who might easily have 50,000 men in his front. Boldness matched boldness. He replied calmly, "Go on." "Such an executive officer," said Lee some days after he had watched Jackson disappear into the forest for the last time, "the sun never shone on. I have but to show him my design, and I know that if it can be done, it will be done. No need for me to send or watch him. Straight as the needle to the pole he advanced to the execution of my purpose."

The time from the Seven Days through Chancellorsville marks the great period of Lee's generalship and the army's highest performance; and it was Jackson who was the qualifying element. After his death the nature of the army changed and Lee's generalship was modified. Before, when the army had to undergo reorganization, the refitting and substitutions took place according to the structure assumed after the Seven Days. And the test of this structure was Sharpsburg. On that field the army showed it could stand on the defensive, and Lee showed he could handle troops in actual combat. In the stress of the battle there he was forced to direct the tactical dispositions, and they were done so well that every movement was exactly timed to meet the emergency, just as, strategically, the divisions reunited on the field in time to prevent disaster. The one criticism Freeman makes of Lee is of his failure to estimate the fatigue of the army after Second Manassas. Straggling on the way to Maryland had sadly reduced its strength. But Lee had come a long way from his first battle. He no longer attempted grand movements. He satisfied himself with simple flank attacks and quick marches to the rear; and he had become a master at patching up the combat units after the battle's damage. At no time until the end of the War was the morale of the army so low as after Sharpsburg; yet by careful rebuilding, rest, food, and refitting, it was brought to the high

efficiency of Fredericksburg, the Confederacy's high noon, and Chancellorsville, the beginning of the decline.

When Lee heard of Jackson's fall, his calm face was overcast with anguish; and his voice choked with emotion as he dictated a reply to that soldier's message, telling him the victory was his. When it was learned that the doctor had given up hope, Lee knelt in prayer and, as Freeman says, "went down spiritually to the brook of Jabbok and, like Jacob, wrestled with the angel." He would not believe that Jackson would die, and who can say that in his refusal to accept the inevitable was not a dread of ultimate defeat as well as personal grief, for no one knew better than Lee that Jackson's place would not be filled. Freeman closes the second book with the following paragraph. It is worth quoting, as its splendid prose brings to an end his brilliant handling of the army's first phase. . . "There was a stir outside the tent, a moment of hesitation, and then some one brought in a bit of folded paper. It contained the brief and dreadful news. In the little cottage at Guiney's, Jackson had roused from his restless sleep and had struggled to speak. His mind had been wandering far—who knows how far?—but with an effort, in his even, low voice, he had said: 'Let us pass over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees.' And then, as so often on marches into the unknown, he had led the way." As Lee read the note, in his distress he too must have asked that same question—who now would lead the way?

He answered it by dividing the Second Corps into two segments, placing Ewell over the reduced Second, and Hill over a new Third Corps. The entire reorganization of the army was the most drastic ever undertaken; and although Lee did the best he could in the exigencies of the War (Confederate fortunes in the west were desperate), Freeman states that the army was back where it had been before the Seven Days. What it could do without Jackson was unknown. But the Pennsylvania campaign must be undertaken with the least delay to relieve the pressure on Vicksburg, before the officers and men would be able to accustom themselves to their new relationships. There were two untried corps commanders, the character of one of these, Ewell, being unknown to Lee; a third of the divisions under new leaders; one corps with two new divisions; seven freshly promoted brigadiers; six infantry brigades commanded by senior colonels; a third

of the cavalry directed by officers who had not previously served with the army; and the most experienced corps commander, Longstreet, inflated with self-importance and believing he controlled his commander's mind. There was, to offset these disadvantages, the high morale of the troops; and there was Lee. But even Lee without Jackson was an unknown quantity. It was the fate of the Confederacy that such conditions prevailed in the Army of Northern Virginia on the eve of its most critical battle. The reorganization after Chancellorsville, states Freeman, explains Gettysburg.

Gettysburg was a Confederate reverse because Lee failed, as at the Seven Days, to get any coördination in his attacks. On the first day Ewell failed to rise to his new responsibility. The discretion Lee always gave his corps commanders confused Ewell, who had been accustomed to Jackson's explicit orders. But equally, Lee failed to adjust his habits to get the best out of Ewell; therefore, the success on the first day was only partial. When it became apparent that Ewell would do no more, Lee's military sense told him his line ought to be shortened by drawing in on Seminary ridge; but when Ewell protested, he surrendered his judgment and acquiesced in the fishhook formation. Freeman condones this decision, but Lee violated his own theory of the commander's function. It is the general's duty to make the plan, the subordinate's to carry it out. On the second day things drifted badly. Lee gave only one positive order, and that was to Longstreet to attack at eleven o'clock. He did not stay to see it executed, although he was fully aware of his most capable lieutenant's sullen behavior, his passive resistance to the offensive, which was Lee's announced plan of action. Freeman goes so far as to say that the army was without a commander on the second day. On the third day it was the same thing, except that Longstreet became openly insubordinate. Stuart's absence partly exonerates Lee for his lack of control, for he was in the dark as to the enemy's strength and position; and under such circumstances his action could not have the drive which accurate information would have given it; but it does not completely excuse him, and he did not ask to be excused, for his failure, once he had settled on a plan, to have it executed. Freeman lays the principal blame upon Longstreet: but finally, Lee cannot be absolved. There is a difference between leaving the tactical management to the corps commander when he is obedi-

ent and when he is insubordinate. It was Lee's plain duty to force Longstreet to obey him, or to turn the corps over to somebody who would. Freeman concludes that Lee had to put up with his subordinate's behaviour, because he was his most skilled commander; but, as it turned out, Longstreet did no actual commanding. He merely stood in the way to block whatever chance there was of success for Pickett's thrust. The author further explains Lee's action on the grounds of his overconfidence in the butternut ranks. This may partly interpret the reasons, but it does not excuse his violation on those three days of his conception of the commander's business: he failed to get the troops into position at the proper time; he allowed his subordinates to interfere with his plan of battle; and he failed to see that the battle was joined when ordered.

Afterwards, in the Wilderness, in the shifts to the right at Cold Harbor, and finally, in the trenches at Petersburg, Lee showed that he had found out what a change Jackson's death had wrought in the army. More and more he assumed direct responsibility. It took the battle of Gettysburg to make him aware of what he must expect of himself under the new conditions. It was the South's misfortune that it had to be that particular battle, for afterwards his power was seen at its fullest. And Freeman's treatment retains its convincing analysis of the army's defensive operations. He dismisses Longstreet's contention that, saving his wound, he would have pushed his advantage in the Wilderness flank attack to victory, by demonstrating that the enemy had been pushed as far as circumstances allowed when the bullet struck. When Grant finally slipped to the south of the James, the author defends Lee's surprise by showing in detail how little exact information Beauregard furnished, and how Lee's care and prudence did not allow him to move until he was sure of the enemy's intentions.

In the preface and in the short summation at the end the author states that there is nothing in Lee's life to interpret. We are told that he was a simple Christian gentleman. That he was a Christian gentleman of the old school the most disputatious would not deny; but that he was a simple man seems far from the truth. An action may be simple and direct but have the most complex implications. Lee's code was strict. It extended into all his relationships, his duty to himself, to his family, to the army, to the Confederacy and its civil authority. It was complete as no code can be today.

But this completeness does not prohibit the necessity for interpretation. Indeed, every author, whether he recognizes it or not, interprets his protagonist by writing about him. The arrangement of his material, his constant selection and analysis, form opinion as assuredly by implication as by statement. The failure to recognize this is to make a specific interpretation often masquerade as something else.

This, perhaps, has led the author to ignore the full relationship between two phases of Lee's conduct: his dealings with the civil authority and his attitude after Appomattox. The first is important because it bound Lee's army to a fixed object, Richmond. The defense of Richmond should have been a secondary object. The aim of the war was to bring about Southern independence. Lee is excused on the ground of his belief in the subordination of the military to the civil government. In a recognized nation this is a sound attitude; but, actually, since the Confederacy assumed the rôle of revolution, there was no civil authority until it had been established by the armies in the field. Lee's relationship, therefore, could not be to the civil authorities of a revolutionary government what it had been to the old United States. Did Lee recognize this changed relation? If he did not, was he not unfit for the fullest performance of the greatest military leader of a revolution? The consideration of this matter cannot be dismissed in the definitive life of the gentleman. To state, as the author does, that Lee felt the military must subordinate itself to the civil, in the light of the situation, begs the question. His model, Washington, certainly did not view the question in the same light.

Most of the last book is taken up with the final, what some may consider the significant, phase in this great man's life. But the treatment here does not match the skill with which the war period has been handled. It is diffuse and uncertain. It accumulates fresh incidents; it goes into great detail about the management of Washington College; it treats extensively the changing curriculum and the growing endowment of the college; it takes Lee to the springs, on visits to his kin and admirers. Lee in all this activity has been interpreted as the guide to Southern salvation. This salvation is to be achieved by building up the character of Southern youth; by accepting the decision of battle through the faithful adherence to the terms of surrender with the hope that, by the mercy of God, things will

come all right in the end. This is a valid interpretation—it has been the common one—but it is inadequate. The mercy of God did not bring independence. Nor was the war over. One phase of it was done, but the old wounds were kept open by the Reconstruction policy and the worst form of guerilla warfare. The avowed purpose of this policy, which broke the terms at Appomattox and Goldsboro, was the destruction of Southern civilization. Did Lee not see that the training of a few thousand students at Washington college was a futile thing, if their civilization was to be wrecked? And what was submission but the worst form of slavery? Fortunately the leadership changed to the middle South, to those who led the Ku Klux Klan, that society which made survival possible. If Lee did not understand the implications of the policy of the Northern radicals, who were the government, his nobility conceals a serious flaw.

It is just this attitude of Lee during the days of peace that needs interpretation, and it is the lack of interpretation in the present biography that fails to explain his acceptance of personal defeat. It is hard to believe, as Freeman would have us, that this acceptance was passive. His "I had rather face a thousand deaths than meet General Grant"; the furious pacing under the apple tree after surrender; the partial withdrawal from life; the refusal to discuss the battles; his distrust of politicians; the coldness his old officers noticed on occasion; his simple statement to Captain White on one of their rides, *apropos* of nothing, that if Jackson had been at Gettysburg, he would have won the battle; his rapid transition from maturity to old age—do not all these things point to a terrific struggle to maintain his mask? Do they not show that resignation was not in his heart? All the time he must have been fighting again the battles and questioning his actions. And must he not have tried to find the answer to his failure in a comparison of his career with that of his father—careers so different but both ending in defeat? Must he not have asked himself how virtue can fail or did he know how the noble man may be pursued by Fate and overthrown? Or did the flaw lie deeper, somewhere behind that irreproachable mask, in the refusal to demean his personal code to save the cause?

These questions are not proposed in this work; but they must be considered before the biography of Lee can be said, in all respects, to be definitive.